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politicians love gun control:

reframing the debate
around gun ownership
by sweet tea

Never in history has violence been initiated by the oppressed. How could they be the initiators, if they themselves are the result of violence?....There would be no oppressed had there been no prior situation of violence to establish their subjugation. It is not the unloved who initiate disaffection, but those who cannot love because they love only themselves.

-Paolo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

about the author

Sweet Tea is a southern queer White boy currently living in the small town of Carrboro, North Carolina. He is involved in local anarchist community organizing via the Prison Books Collective, as well as the free breakfast and grocery programs of Comida No Migra!. Sweet Tea also enjoys finding new and fabulous things at Carrboro's monthly really really free markets, playing music with his friends, talking to his cats, discussing crazy social theory, kissing cute boys, training in kung fu, and shooting his AK-47 at pictures of professional politicians and other tyrants.

To rant and rave and complain about the ideas in this 'zine, or to share tips on free/cheap places to shoot in the NC triangle area, email nocompromise_105@hotmail.com

If you liked what you read here, you might also enjoy Sweet Tea's other zine, "Queers Bash Back: the anarchist influence on queer youth culture."

a (highly suggested) reading list

How Nonviolence Protects the State by Peter Gelderloos

Pacifism as Pathology by Ward Churchill

Black Panthers Speak compiled and edited by Phillip S. Foner

Desire Armed: A Basic Guide to Armed Resistance and Revolution
published by Kansas Mutual Aid

A People's History of the United States by Howard Zinn

Lessons of the Spanish Revolution by Vernon Richards

I, Phoolan Devi by Phoolan Devi

Assata by Assata Shakur



Culture Wars

In the United States, I am often told, the “culture war” is in full effect. Heated debates around controversial issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, and religion in public institutions abound. In many of these cases there is undoubtedly some level of grassroots support for the various entrenched sides of the debate; the elite Human Rights Campaign, for example, does manage to successfully pull away millions of dollars from queer folks every year. But on the level of policy decisions, the actual positions adopted in these “cultural wars” are usually decided by elite members of such groups, manipulated into thirty-second sound bites, easily simplified into emotional appeals, and transformed from an issue of freedom or liberation (the ability to love and relate to anyone of any gender one chooses, for example) to an issue of institutional and legislative policy (the ability to experience all the institutional privileges of marriage, which will continue to be denied to those who choose to not have their relations sanctified by a government).

Perhaps the most surprising thing about these supposed culture wars is how *similar* the major actors are to each other. Both sides are represented by well-dressed, well-funded, usually White individuals, whose organizations are large, bureaucratic, extremely hierarchical, single-issue and electoral in focus. We are reminded more of governments competing for territory or corporations aggressively trying to buy out each other's production facilities, with all the passive inhabitants or workers held in the balance, rather than an authentic, grassroots social movement directed at casting off society's repressive mores.

Somewhere in the midst of these cultural wars, and fitting into this pattern quite nicely, lies the issue of gun control. Though as a public controversy it may have been surpassed in recent years by other “cultural” topics, gun control remains an extremely divisive

subject. Because this debate cuts to the heart of the meaning of government itself, and thereby is directly related to the success or failure of liberation movements throughout the world, and because pro- and anti-gun control stances in this country are *both* usually characterized by racist, capitalist, and pro-government discourse, I am hoping to contribute to a complete reframing of this debate.

Primarily this reframing depends upon two things: (1) a look at historic and contemporary social movements where access to firearms has been a decisive factor, and (2) the perspective that government is best fundamentally characterized as the “monopoly of force” in a society. This means simply that a government is the only institution or group of people in a society which can “legitimately” use violent coercion against others. For example, if a family is evicted from their home at gunpoint by a police officer, that cop’s violence is not punished but is in fact financially rewarded by our society. If that same family physically refuses to leave, however, they will end up behind bars. Whatever one’s opinion about government may be, it is clear that the “legitimacy” of this State violence is not innate but constructed in our society by this same group of governing people in their very powerful position. I am defining government as the monopoly of force because I think this is the simplest, most common, and least controversial definition available, and because it reflects back on the decisive nature of any debate on whether or not civilians should have access to weapons. I am also defining government in this way because it helps us to orient ourselves in the direction of creating a more peaceful, secure society that is not founded upon violence, which is something I believe nearly everyone (except perhaps politicians and weapons industry bosses) on both “sides” of the gun control debate desires.

Here are a few concrete things we can do to advance our own self-defense, exert our communities’ autonomy, and change the current dialogue that surrounds gun ownership...

- Support voluntary, non-State initiated peace work in communities that regularly deal with gun violence.
- Work against sexually and emotionally abusive relationship patterns that so often result in violence against women and children.
- Support all oppressed people’s right to defend themselves, regardless of whether or not their attackers work for the government.
- Organize community forums and neighborhood assemblies that deal with problems locally rather than going to the police and courts.
- Organize anti-racist, queer-positive, and women-positive self defense patrols that can defend folks from racist attacks and police brutality.
- Organize our own comfortable, safe environments where we can train with firearms safely and effectively. Buy ammunition in bulk to save money!
- Be clear that gun ownership does NOT mean support for the arms industry, the military, or sport hunting.
- Support efforts by rank-and-file soldiers to speak and act out against the military hierarchy.
- Defend gun ownership in the face of legislative attacks, on principle.
- Show up to gun shows as a visibly queer-positive, anti-racist, feminist, and anti-capitalist presence. These are great places to learn about weapons and their uses from knowledgeable people.

nized historical necessity of self-defense. This is especially true when it comes to anti-racist, anti-capitalist, anti-government movements like the ones this country so desperately needs.

Gun control advocates affirm that only the government ought to be able to use firearms, and therefore by definition they support that elite's "monopoly of force," even as they claim to abhor the results of that force. In their White supremacy, support for police and military forces, and institutionalization at the hands of the NRA, most anti-gun control folks also support this same "monopoly of force." To choose between these two positions, then, is to have no choice at all. A reframing of this debate is obviously necessary, and I hope that this piece is a useful step in that direction. We do not have to choose between racist institutions and their arms industry backers on the one hand, and legislation-happy White liberals on the other. We can support efforts towards peace and freedom in communities plagued by gun violence, challenge the roots of domestic violence, and fight against war abroad all without giving police one more excuse for repression and thereby strengthening their "monopoly of force."

Part of this is simply a matter of admitting (or for many of us, proudly declaring!) that middle-class White liberals do not always or even often know best. It also means recognizing that the ways in which "cultural" debates are institutionalized in our country reflect the way our society is structured, so that either side of the debate is imbued with the racist, homophobic, sexist, capitalist, and hierarchical logic that characterize "our" institutions. We need to rework these debates so that our beliefs can be enacted directly in our lives and our communities, without being mediated by lobbyists and professional politicians. Instead of being oriented towards the compromised electoral positions of the Right and Left, our stake in the "culture wars" should be oriented towards the practical needs of our communities and our own ethical principles of freedom, equality, decentralization, and dignity.

The Major Players

In one corner of the gun control debate are folks who remain firm believers in one's right to bear arms, and who are (unfortunately) represented institutionally by the National Rifle Association (NRA), a very large organization that is funded by a massive US arms industry. These folks are a mixed bunch indeed: some want guns for hunting purposes, some want guns to protect them from communists, or from terrorists, or from chaos and ecological collapse, or from tyranny and fascism, or they *are* racists and fascists and want to "protect themselves" from people of color, or perhaps they want to better serve tyranny in its use of systemic violence against those same people of color, as was done by white supremacist vigilante groups cooperating with police in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. This camp draws a great deal of support from White poor, rural, and working-class folks, though they are "represented" by a multi-billion dollar arms industry and its lobbyist, the NRA. People opposed to gun control in the US tend to be right-wing, pro-government folks in their practical attitudes towards domestic and international military and police repression, and yet somehow they see themselves as fighting *against* government control.

If nothing else, then, right-wing anti-gun control tendencies in the US are a mass of contradictions. Probably the best example of this is the NRA's newest propaganda, "Freedom in Peril," a large pamphlet detailing in full-color the abuses heaped upon gun owners by crazed liberal politicians. Using language like, "It's inevitable that terrorists will infest America for generations to come," but at the same time arguing that it is anti-terrorism legislation which will result in, "the final disarmament of law-abiding Americans," this pamphlet jumps from one paranoid fear to another, regardless of

consistency. On one page we see an image of an old woman on the ground, disarmed and surrounded by violent riot police, but on the next page we see a poor policeman being gagged, unable to arrest "illegal aliens." Rather than have a coherent position on the relationship between government and gun ownership, the NRA will in one sentence discuss how chaos and fear provide an excuse for government tyranny, while at the same time promote that same fear through millenarian talk of terrorism, impending ecological disaster, animal rights "terrorists," and racist images of gangs. The NRA is in a difficult position that naturally gives rise to contradictions: it is an explicitly pro-capitalist institution embedded in the political elite of our country, yet it must appeal to the "average Joe's" resentment of the authority and wealth of these same elite. The result is confusing at best.

It should be pointed out, however, that unlike pro-gun control institutions like the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, the NRA does offer its rank-and-file constituency real practical support. For example, if a member's gun is stolen, the NRA will replace that gun at no charge whatsoever, which can add up to hundreds if not thousands of dollars of support for individual members. This benefit alone is enough for many people who completely disagree with the NRA's politics to join up.

The historical roots of the anti-gun control position are complicated and somewhat unique to the United States, so they deserve mention as well. In colonial times, one of the British strategies for controlling an increasingly rebellious and independent colonial population was prohibiting the possession of firearms, especially in the context of local militias. In this sense, for many people the "right to bear arms" was fundamentally connected to the "freedoms" guaranteed by the new United States. Paradoxically, in its fight against the British and its simultaneous attempt to centralize power in the new nation, George Washington's Continental

last, the city council was completely ambivalent. One council member suggested they apply for a \$500 grant. Even after gang homicide tallies plunged, police still responded with skepticism. Cops began to break up peaceful meetings of members from different gangs, and then arrested a key architect of the multi-peace treaty named Dewayne Holmes who was in turn sentenced to seven years in prison for a ten-dollar robbery. One gang member named Kershaun Scott wrote in the Los Angeles Times, "Now that we're chilling they want to attack us. Isn't that ironic?"

For those interested in supporting gang peace efforts in LA, there were many options, including vocal support of the treaty and opposition to police efforts to undermine it, support for Dewayne Holmes' legal defense, as well as raising funds to support community members' creation of self-managed infrastructure that would render gangs less necessary. White people effectively did none of these. The least sensible of any of these options would be imposing *more* White control over communities of color through the enactment of legislation that allows White police to forcefully disarm community residents, but this option seems to get the most air time and in fact is the most common.

At this point it is quite clear that both sides of the gun control debate in the US are completely inadequate and in fact rooted in some form of White, institutional control and racist attitudes. This should come as no surprise considering who the major institutional players are and that they are both fundamentally supportive of the US government. It also seems that much of what determines where someone stands on this debate is determined not by a realistic, open-minded assessment of our political options, but by cultural considerations like whether or not one is "comfortable" or "grew up" around weapons. This is not an adequate basis for any kind of politics. No matter what our personal comfort level may be with violence or weapons, our heads cannot be in the sand when it comes to the recog-

reality that we are living in. Weapons and the necessity of self-defense are a part of that reality. Whether we have to confront this reality now or in twenty years, clearly it will be easier to confront if we have access to the right tools.

To return to a criticism of the traditional anti-gun control attitudes as well as pro-gun control advocates, probably the fundamental factor in both sides of this debate is White supremacy. On the one hand, traditional right-wing gun nuts in this country are notoriously racist, and the propaganda put out by the NRA reflects this. Behind this is a paranoid fear of people of color, ultimately the desire to become an unpaid police officer in some fictitious race war to come. The White supremacy of the liberal gun control position is more subtle, but its results are perhaps even more heinous because they are enacted through the US Government. Whether out of an equally racist fear of armed people of color, or out of a more “benevolent” desire to “help” communities where gun violence is common, predominantly White liberals use gun control to legislate the freedoms of communities of color to which they have no accountability, no legitimacy, and no connection. The fundamental effect of this kind of legislation is predictable: rather than reducing violence in communities of color, such laws give racist cops one more thing with which to harass, detain, arrest, and brutalize people of color.

For those who are (justifiably) concerned about gun violence, but are not a part of these communities themselves, there are many more effective options at hand for approaching peace. The most obvious of these is supporting voluntary armistices and peace treaties orchestrated by gang and community members themselves. One example might be the “Multi-Peace Treaty,” a voluntary treaty organized and officially put into effect by multiple gangs from Los Angeles on April 28th, 1992. When 250 Bloods and Crips marched on LA City Council to announce this peace treaty, and to ask for financial support in creating an economic infrastructure that would make this peace

Army *also* attempted to disband local armed militias, creating a sense of resentment as well as loyalty to the new national government.

This resentment fueled the fire of later rebellions by poor White farmers, such as Shay’s Rebellion, to which the national government responded first with a Riot Act which put farmers in jail without trial and restricted weapons ownership, then with brutal violence and hangings, and then by drawing up a new constitution in 1787 which ultimately centralized power into an even more powerful national elite. One farmer involved in this rebellion named Plough Jogger said at an illegal assembly,

I have been greatly abused, have been obliged to do more than my part in the war; been loaded with class rates, town rates, province rates, Continental rates and all rates...been pulled and hauled by sheriffs, constables, and collectors, and had my cattle sold for less than they were worth...

...The great men are going to get all we have and I think it is time for us to rise and put a stop to it, and have no more courts, nor sheriffs, nor collectors nor lawyers...
(Zinn, 92)

Though they certainly contradict the right-wing political positions of the NRA and its politicians, Jogger’s words do lie at the foundation of much anti-gun control sentiment in this country. It should be pointed out that in the midst of Shay’s Rebellion a far more brutal system of violence was being used to repress African slaves and their moves for freedom, a repression which *also* depended upon denying access to weapons. This pattern of denying weapons to oppressed classes and ethnicities is a globally consistent trend, reflected in right-wing Nazi Germany, left-wing Communist Russia, and everywhere in between.

In the other corner are advocates of increased gun control, which quite simply means increased government control over our ability to access, train with, and use weapons, including for self-defense. Institutions like Handgun Control, Inc. and the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence lobby for gun control legislation and give money to federal candidates, especially in regards to assault weapons and handguns. These institutions have contributed a total of only \$1.7 million dollars to gun control advocates since 1989, while the NRA has given ten times that amount to lobby for greater access to guns. They did, however, succeed in passing an assault weapons ban called the Brady Bill in 1994, which has since expired. This bill in fact did little to curb assault weapons ownership because of large loopholes and a grandfather clause that made it legal to own assault weapons manufactured prior to 1994. The Brady Bill was passed largely on misconceptions and ignorance: many people thought they were pushing for a ban on automatic weapons, when in fact it was already illegal to own those without a separate license, and the bill instead had an overly vague focus on semi-automatics.

The ideological roots of the pro-gun control position in the US are also based around a number of differing cultural perspectives and sentiments. There are folks who have concerns about the number of handgun-related homicides in inner-city areas; White people whose already racist impulses have been fueled by racist media portrayals of dangerous, young Black and Brown men; anti-war activists who believe that gun control must go hand in hand with opposing war; people concerned about domestic violence against women and children via handguns and politicians courting a pro-gun control population. The basic logic of much gun control advocacy is that violence is bad, guns are often used in violence, therefore guns are bad, therefore it would be better if the government was the only group of people who is able to use them (presumably against everyone else?). Gun control advocates tend more to be liberal, middle- and upper-

A New Stake in the Culture War

Observing that guns have been instrumental in US social movements, and declaring that they will inevitably play some kind of role in any movement that attempts to challenge the “monopoly of force” held by the economic and political elite, is *not* equivalent to saying that firearms are a good thing. It is not a moral apology for an arms industry that has helped create a world where death is more welcomed than life, where the killing of animals is more often considered a “sport” than a necessary but respectful and sustainable human activity, where war and genocide are always right around the corner. Firearms undoubtedly represent to many people patriarchy and machismo, and will continue to do so no matter how many “revolutionaries” own them.

In short, guns are not a morally or politically neutral tool, any more than electricity derived from fossil fuels or cellular phones that use Coltan*. But for some reason, while few claim that future social movements will succeed without the at least temporary use of electricity and cell phones, quite a number of these movements’ more conservative actors claim that guns have no place in our midst. Their strange logical follow-up to this is that the government, previously assumed to be an enemy of freedom, equality, and integrity, ought to be the only institution able to use these tools.

Nevertheless, it has to be constantly reemphasized that guns are by themselves nothing more than wood and steel and plastic, that they are not “the revolution,” nor are they even a primary force in it. That force is people. Inspiring people to change the world requires practical steps towards that end, and this means acknowledging the

*All cell phones currently require for production the substance tantalum powder, derived from the rare mineral Coltan found mainly in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is estimated that nearly 3 million people have died in a four-year resource war over this mineral, not to mention the ecological destruction of the mining process itself.

white vigilantes successfully pushed the racists out of their neighborhood, and cleared the way for the organizing work Common Grounds would soon begin. One can only imagine how many lives might have been saved and how New Orleans might have changed for the better had more resources been freed up from the financially inefficient, bureaucratic strangleholds of the Red Cross and National Guard and instead been used to promote the kind of radical, grassroots relief efforts of Common Grounds.

This is an extremely brief overview of a wide range of diverse, complicated movements, but it points to a fairly obvious reality: firearms are a fact of life when it comes to social movements in the US. They may not always or even often be visibly present, but access to them has been a necessary component of most every large social movement this country has experienced, *especially* when we factor in international resistance to US foreign policies and economic interests. The role of firearms in struggles for dignity, autonomy, justice, civil rights, security from police brutality, economic equality, and freedom does not require a justification, simply an *observation*. There is no identifiable social movement in this country, including the ones whose results we hold most dear in our daily lives, that has not needed to use some kind of violence or threat of violence to challenge the US government and economic elite's "monopoly of force." It is hypocritical to appreciate the elimination of chattel slavery, or the 8 hour work-day, or even government programs like Head Start, which began as a pale imitation of Black Panther free breakfast programs, while simultaneously attempting to limit or eliminate civilian access to the tools which helped to achieve these changes. This goes without mentioning the deeper, broader, more fundamental changes which will be required if we want to get their "monopoly of force" off our backs for good.

class White people, who have far less experience with institutional violence than others in this country, and are more likely to be able to depend on police for protection. It is also important to point out that in no way do gun control advocates, as such, push for the *government* to have less access to firearms or for fewer circumstances where the government is allowed to use those weapons.

Part of the pro-gun control position is related to the power which corporate media has in reporting crime. As Michael Moore points out in *Bowling For Columbine**, crime rates have been generally dropping on a national level since the early 90's, and yet media representations of criminal acts, crime shows, and the people they portray as a criminal class (predominantly young black men) have all increased dramatically. This creates a public perception that gun-related crime is increasing when it actually is not, thereby creating an environment of fear ripe for increased government control of weapons ownership. Interestingly, racist media portrayals of "dangerous young black men" are also at the heart of much *anti*-gun control sentiment, in the sense of White folks wanting to protect themselves from this "threat." In either case, predominantly wealthy, White institutions are lobbying a predominantly White government to control communities of color which have been constructed as a threat by a White corporate media.

Rather than identifying the causes of domestic violence and property crime (such as male-dominated family structures and living in a very class and race-stratified society) or targeting governments themselves as the major purveyors of violence throughout the world, gun control advocates focus on *civilian* ownership of "the tools of violence." In avoiding the root causes of violence, and thereby avoiding the physical struggle it would require to fix these systemic

*Though Moore's politics contain all the normal contradictions and basic conservative impulse of other US liberals, this documentary does at times do a good job of pushing the gun control debate beyond issues of "safety" and into discussions around race, corporate media, and our culture of fear.

problems, and in actively supporting a violent U.S. government's monopoly of force by helping them to monopolize that force, pro-gun control folks *also* stand on a bed of contradictions.

Gun control advocates will often find themselves being "against" the government when it comes to war, police brutality, corporate welfare, and free trade rulings, but actively *support* the government's monopoly of force via gun control. In this sense many advocates of gun control consider themselves involved in other "movements," but believe that social movements are most effective when they are not able to use physical force or even the threat of physical force. Gun control advocates thus hope to limit social movements' methods of changing government and corporations' behavior to proper, "democratic" channels, channels which these same "progressives" themselves will admit are corrupt. It is this belief about social movements, their reliance upon the moral benevolence and democratic channels of our country's ruling elite, and the role of weapons access that I hope to elaborate on in the next section.

movement never actually reached a point of armed resistance before being abruptly cut short by 9-11. Nevertheless, the international roots of this "anti-globalization," which would more accurately be labeled a movement against neoliberal capitalism, lie in the successful armed insurrection of poor indigenous folks from southern Mexico called the Zapatistas. The more recent US movement against the war in Iraq has had almost none of this militancy or direct action, and given current troop increases of 20,000 to that land now ravaged by four years of occupation, has been remarkably *unsuccessful* in changing the US Government's behavior.

A final example of the presence of weapons in US social movements can be seen in the Common Ground Collective, a large and still-growing radical relief effort which began in the days after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. Co-founded by an ex-Black Panther named Malik Rahim and organized by hundreds of in- and out-of-town anarchists, earth first!ers, food not bombs volunteers, 9th ward residents, radical street medics, previous civil rights and black power activists, and others, Common Grounds was the first group to open a free walk-in health clinic in the lower 9th ward after the storm. Since then they have opened more free health clinics, distributed tens of thousands of dollars worth of food and supplies, gutted hundreds of houses, helped tenants fight evictions, raised awareness and opposition to the massive gentrification being attempted by the City in Katrina's aftermath, and generally brought a practical approach to the anger that New Orleans residents have towards bureaucrats in the Red Cross, National Guard, NOPD, and FEMA. Relevant to our discussion is the origins of Common Ground, whose core group of founders began as an armed response to white supremacist vigilante groups who were, with permission and cooperation from New Orleans police, out on patrol "looking for looters." Malik and others contacted friends in the city and asked them to bring to the 9th ward not food and supplies, but guns. Their initial stand-off with the

“nonviolent” protests to integrate small handfuls of Black students in the South required the violent presence of thousands of armed federal troops. It was also blatantly apparent that the police were targeting both northern and southern Black communities, not protecting them, and that if anyone were to protect those communities from violence, it would be the residents themselves. It was in this environment that the southern Deacons for Self-Defense, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the Latino Young Lords Party, and other revolutionary organizations formed.

These went on to be some of the most effective revolutionary organizations this country has ever seen, completely changing the face of black and brown politics forever. Despite predominantly White liberal calls for Nonviolence, which spoke of class and race privilege more than wisdom, these organizations fed the hungry, educated their communities, formed free health clinics, successfully used armed cop-watch patrols to lessen police brutality*, and created a new kind of politics around mutual aid and self-determination. The Black Panthers themselves were armed, and their social programs were made possible partly with the additional revenue of the Black Liberation Army, a clandestine organization that freed prisoners and robbed banks to fund programs in poor communities of color. Ironically, it was right-wing Governor of California Ronald Reagan who introduced some of the country’s first gun control legislation, explicitly as an attack on the Black Panthers.

To move on to a more contemporary social movement, the “anti-globalization” movement was known for bringing a new era of street fighting and militancy to the stale, reformist, and ineffective activism of an earlier decade. Beginning in the US after the effective shut down of World Trade Organization talks in Seattle 1999, this

*Specifically in Oakland, CA, statistics on police killings of African-Americans from before and after the emergence of the Panthers’ armed patrols show the positive effect of those patrols. This was made possible because it was legal to carry firearms as long as they weren’t concealed.

Social Movements and Access to Weapons

The project of laying out all the social movements where access to weapons was a decisive factor in success or failure is daunting, and could in fact never be complete. It does seem pertinent, however, to mention just a few instances where the use of weapons or at least their availability has played a major role in the United States. For this section I am basically defining a social movement as a gathering of people throughout a society who are, with increasing momentum, trying to change some fundamentally oppressive, inequalitarian, or hierarchical aspect of that society. The abolitionist movement in pre-civil war times is an example, as are the labor movement of the early 20th century, the US Civil Rights and consequent Black Power movement, the Gay Liberation movement of the late 60’s and 70’s, the women’s liberation movement of that same era, the “anti-globalization” movement (as it was dubbed by the corporate media) of recent times, and the animal rights/liberation movement as it continues to have successes today.

A social movement might challenge just one aspect of a society’s structure or it could have a broader, revolutionary vision. In either case, one fundamental trait of every social movement is that it challenges some aspect of a government’s “monopoly of force.” This may be in the forefront of that movement’s language and perspective, such as in the Vietnam anti-war movement, or may be more in the background, as in the early labor movement, which focused more directly on economic issues but clearly stood in (physical, and often violent) opposition to the power of police and pinkerton thugs as strikebreakers. The primary point for this discussion is that any movement which is successfully attempting to take some fraction of power away from a society’s ruling elite will face violence from that same group of people, who have up to that point solidly maintained their monopoly of force and are therefore “allowed” to use violence.

They are allowed to use that force not because of a divine or moral right or democratic “legitimacy,” but because they are the ones with the financial and political connections to be able to summon the military, the police, paramilitary and/or white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and Pinkerton thugs. This will be true and has been true whether the government and economic elite in question are capitalists or communists, democrats or republicans, dictators or “freely” elected professional politicians. It is not a question of the ideology those in power claim, but one of power itself. For this reason, self-defense is always a vital issue for any successful movement.

As was already stated earlier, one of the many methods of control used during chattel slavery by White owners was not allowing slaves to handle weapons of any kind. During slave uprisings like Nat Turner’s Rebellion these rules were obviously ignored, and the northern abolitionist movement managed to at least sometimes use armed force as well, such as in John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry. White and Black members of the Underground Railroad, who managed to free thousands of slaves via their clandestine networks, were also armed, as was Harriet Tubman, their most famous freedom fighter. Ultimately, over 500,000 men would be killed in a Civil War waged by the US Government to maintain its territory and power, but which was in its later years portrayed as a war against slavery. In the words of historian Howard Zinn,

It would take either a full-scale slave rebellion or a full-scale war to end such a deeply entrenched system [of slavery]. If a rebellion, it might get out of hand, and turn its ferocity beyond slavery to the most successful system of capitalist enrichment in the world. If a war, those who made the war would organize its consequences. Hence it was Abraham Lincoln who “freed the slaves,” not John Brown. In 1859, John Brown was hanged, with federal

complicity, for attempting to do by small-scale violence what Lincoln would do by large-scale violence several years later—end slavery. (Zinn, 171)

Spontaneous uprisings like Nat Turner’s rebellion and John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, as well as the more continuous struggle of clandestine networks, all had a tremendous impact on the ultimate sustainability of chattel slavery in the US.

Movements by poor farmers in this country have almost always required the use of arms, at least as a threat if not in their active use. This is true of North Carolina’s Regulators movement against taxation, the Anti-Renter movement of the Hudson Valley, Shay’s rebellion, the populist movement of the late 19th century, and numerous others. It was true as well of the early labor movement, before the more revolutionary ambitions of the Knights of Labor and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) were sold out for the bureaucratic, conservative, management-friendly style of the AFL-CIO (which is now in drastic decline). Members of the IWW repeatedly had to defend themselves with rifles and pistols, sometimes against government Gatling guns, at picket lines, marches, and other labor conflicts. The United Mine Workers were only able to unionize parts of West Virginia after the bloody battle of Blair Mountain of 1921, in which 10,000 armed miners were fired upon by 25,000 US Army troops*.

If we move on to the late 1960’s, a time when the “peace” movement was at its peak, we can hardly find peace anywhere. The Civil Rights movement had been repeatedly targeted with brutal violence by White people in and out of government uniform. It was clear to increasing numbers of civil rights activists that even the more modest goals of peaceful integration and equal opportunity were not going to be achieved by a Nonviolent movement. Even the earlier

* This battle was also the first and only time that airplanes have bombed US civilians on continental US soil, and it was done by “our” own government.